

**BRITISH REACTION TO THE AMRITSAR
MASSACRE 1919-1920***

Derek Sayer

University of Alberta

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You think Jallianwala proves that the British are lying, talking freedom but acting tyrannically and dealing destruction? Again you are wrong. Jallianwala could never have happened if the British who talk freedom were not sincere. It happened because they are sincere.¹

"We're not out here for the purpose of behaving pleasantly!"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. We're out here to do justice and keep the peace. Them's my sentiments. India isn't a drawing-room."

"Your sentiments are those of a god," she said quietly.²

On the afternoon of 13 April 1919, Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer³ led fifty riflemen of the 1/9th Gurkhas, 54th Sikhs and 59th Sikhs through the streets of Amritsar to the Jallianwala Bagh, where a meeting was being held in defiance of his proclamation banning such gatherings. The Bagh was a piece of waste ground, some two hundred yards long, wholly enclosed by the backs of houses and low boundary walls. It had three or four narrow entrances, the main one only broad enough for two people to

* I am indebted to John Comoroff, Philip Corrigan, John Gartrell, Victor Kiernan, Philip Lawson, P. A. Saram, Teodor Shanin and Hugh Wilson for comments on earlier drafts of this article. I owe E. P. Thompson particular thanks both for comments and for making available unpublished work of his own. This article is indebted to a number of studies of the Amritsar massacre, though my argument differs from theirs: V. N. Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh* (Ludhiana, 1969); A. Draper, *Amritsar: The Massacre that Ended the Raj* (London, 1981); H. Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment: The Massacre at Jallianwala Bagh and British Judgement, 1919-1920* (Honolulu, 1977); R. Furneaux, *Massacre at Amritsar* (London, 1963); R. Ram, *The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: A Premeditated Plan* (Chandigarh, 1969); A. Swinson, *Six Minutes to Sunset* (London, 1964).

¹ Paul Scott, *The Day of the Scorpion*, in *The Raj Quartet* (1966-75) (London, 1976 edn.; first pubd. 1968), p. 62.

² E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (London, 1985 edn.; first pubd. 1924), p. 62.

³ Born at Murree, a small hill-station in the Punjab, in 1864, Dyer was educated at Bishop Cotton School, Simla, Middleton College, co. Cork, and the Royal Military College, Simla. He was commissioned in the Queen's Royal Regiment in 1885, transferring to the Indian Army in 1888, where he served with distinction. During World War I, he commanded British operations in south-east Persia, receiving a C.B. The *Dictionary of National Biography* describes him as a simple and courageous soldier — an image touted by his supporters in 1919-20 (see, for example, the letter to *The Times*, 1 June 1920, on the relief of Thal, from one of his men).

walk abreast. This proved too small to permit the passage of the two armoured cars, with mounted machine-guns, which Dyer had brought with him. Shortly after 5 p.m. he led his troops up the narrow alley. The crowd in the Bagh was later estimated at more than twenty thousand people. Among them were many villagers from the surrounding countryside, in Amritsar for the *Baisakhi* holiday and the cattle-market held on that day.

Within thirty seconds of his arrival Dyer ordered his men to open fire. No warning was given, nor was there any demand that the crowd disperse. The firing continued for ten minutes; in all, 1,650 rounds were spent. Dyer ordered fire to be focused where the crowd was thickest, including the exits. He only gave the order to cease fire when his ammunition was virtually exhausted. According to official figures, 379 people were killed and over 1,200 wounded; Indian estimates are much higher. Dyer later acknowledged that had he been able to use his machine-guns he probably would have done so, with inevitably larger casualties. He made no provision for the wounded; it was, he said, "not my job".⁴ Such was "Amritsar", the single event which by common consent did most to undo British rule in India.

I

Winston Churchill, the secretary of state for War at the time, called it "an episode . . . without precedent or parallel in the modern history of the British Empire . . . an extraordinary event, a monstrous event, an event which stands in singular and sinister isolation". Herbert Asquith claimed "there has never been such an incident in the whole annals of Anglo-Indian history nor, I believe, in the history of our Empire from its very inception down to the present day . . . It is one of the worst outrages in the whole of our history".⁵ In some ways they were undoubtedly right. The British had put down armed uprisings in India and elsewhere in the past with exemplary brutality.⁶ But no previous

⁴ *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Government of India to Investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab, etc.*, Parliamentary Papers (hereafter P.P.), 1920 (Cmd. 681), xiv, pp. 1001-192 (hereafter *Hunter Committee*), p. 1120.

⁵ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxx, cols. 1725, 1736.

⁶ During the Indian Mutiny reprisals had been savage, while in 1872 local officials at Maler Kotla in the Punjab had sixty-five Kuka rebels blown from the mouths of cannon (without prior trial). This action was approved by the Punjab government, but reproved by the government of India, who removed its perpetrator from office (with a pension). In Jamaica, in 1865, Governor John Eyre had four hundred (arbitrar-

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use of military force, in the United Kingdom or colonies, against an unarmed and peaceable crowd had resulted in a remotely comparable loss of life. Peterloo left eleven dead, and perhaps five hundred wounded.⁷ There is no evidence that the Amritsar massacre was an act of deliberate policy, comparable to Nazi reprisals at Lidice and elsewhere. It appears, on the face of it, a tragic aberration in British imperial history, and Dyer's individual responsibility alone.

Perceptions of Amritsar's singularity have dominated the English historiography. One sign of this is just how little has been written, outside India, on what A. J. P. Taylor has called "the decisive moment when Indians were alienated from British rule".⁸ This stems, I believe, from more than embarrassment in the face of one of the less glorious chapters in British history. The construction of the Amritsar massacre from the start as "singular and sinister" marginalizes it. There has been no need felt to agonize over Amritsar as in any sense a national shame because it is aberrant, in a category by itself, not part of the national history at all. Those few English works that do exist on the topic have for the most part accepted this frame of reference. They assume, and then seek to explain, the exceptionality of Dyer's action. Rupert Furneaux suggests that Dyer's judgement was impaired by the arterio-sclerosis from which he suffered.⁹ Like others, he has also made much of the discrepancies in Dyer's testimony at various times, arguing that it was only his subsequent acclamation as the "Saviour of the Punjab" which led him to explain his action as stemming from anything other than fear of being overwhelmed by the crowd.¹⁰ If this is true, it is itself

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ily selected) blacks killed, six hundred flogged and one thousand huts burned by way of reprisal for rebellion: he was removed from office (and prosecuted by John Stuart Mill). In the United Kingdom, we might recall the four hundred or so killed in the suppression of the Gordon Riots.

⁷ See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), p. 754.

⁸ Quoted in Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, p. xii.

⁹ Furneaux, *Massacre at Amritsar*, pp. 176-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 174 ff. In support of this view Furneaux cites Captain Briggs, who was with Dyer at Jallianwala, and Miles Irving, the district commissioner, on Dyer's behaviour immediately afterwards. It was Edward Thompson who publicized Irving's testimony, in his *A Letter from India* (London, 1930), pp. 102, 104. He did not do so with the intention of exonerating Dyer; as he said in a speech at "Amritsar Day" (London, Conway Hall, 13 April 1945) Dyer's action "was indefensible", and much of what was said in his defence in subsequent debates "if I were an Indian, I should

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revealing. To defend Dyer on the grounds that he was “trailing his coat” before Anglo-Indian opinion begs the question of the character of that opinion itself.¹¹

But by no means all commentators have agreed in seeing Dyer’s action as “singular”. Indian voices are significantly different. Gandhi wrote that “We do not want to punish Dyer. We have no desire for revenge. We want to change the system that produced Dyer”.¹² Raja Ram claims — in my view, without supporting evidence — that the massacre “was not the result of a decision taken by an individual (General Dyer) on the spur of the moment, but of a premeditated plan, carefully designed in advance, and executed on the appointed day, by the British bureaucracy”.¹³ V. N. Datta insists that it was not an isolated phenomenon, but “an expression of a confrontation between ruler and ruled”.¹⁴ Helen Fein, an American sociologist, likewise concludes that Jallianwala was “a prototypical instance of a repressive collective punishment practiced by the British in black and Asian colonies”.¹⁵

Similar points were made by contemporaries. Ben Spoor, speaking for the Labour Party during the 1920 Commons debate on the Dyer case, contended that “Amritsar was not an isolated event any more than General Dyer was an isolated officer”. Three weeks before, at the Labour Party annual conference, Ramsay MacDonald had warned that Dyer must not be allowed to be made the scapegoat for the broader failings of civil government in India.¹⁶ This denial of Amritsar’s singularity was not confined to the critics of British imperialism in India or Britain. Many others, on the opposite side of the fence from Gandhi or MacDonald, did not see Dyer’s action as “singular” (or, in their case, as “monstrous”) either. At the time, the British government’s disavowal of Dyer was deplored by the bulk of Anglo-Indian opinion,

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find it almost impossible to forgive”; “To Indians of every race and religion, Amritsar was a flashlight. It revealed what their rulers thought of them”. I owe this information to E. P. Thompson.

¹¹ “Trailing his coat” was Miles Irving’s description: see Thompson, *Letter from India*, p. 104. Throughout this paper the term “Anglo-Indian” is used to refer to the British in India, as distinct from in Britain.

¹² Cited in Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, frontispiece.

¹³ Ram, *Jallianwala Bagh Massacre*, p. vii.

¹⁴ Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. ix.

¹⁵ Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, pp. xii–xiii.

¹⁶ For Spoor, see *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1739; for MacDonald, see *The Times*, 25 June 1920.

sections of the press in both India and Britain, a very substantial minority in the House of Commons, a majority in the Lords, and (eventually) the court of King's Bench — not to mention the many who gave in their droves to Dyer's defence fund. For them too the massacre was no aberration. It was exactly what Dyer said it was: "my duty — my horrible, dirty duty".¹⁷ My contention here will be that these contemporaries were correct. Though Amritsar was in some quite obvious ways singular, its explanation lies rather in the ways it was not.

In the British responses to Jallianwala Bagh in 1919-20 we can see different constructions of events in the making. I shall say little more in this paper about the Labour Party view, save to register its existence. It needs to be placed on record that some British men and women did see Jallianwala in terms of the pathology of a system, not an individual. These included Anglo-Indians like Benjamin Guy Horniman, the editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, who was deported to Britain for his criticisms of the handling of the Punjab disturbances. No attempt is offered here to assess how representative such sentiments were. My concern is rather with the responses of those we can loosely call the "governing classes", both in India and "at home". One response, which started with the findings of the Hunter Committee set up to investigate the disorders, was to become the authorized version. This was the view of the British government — somewhat reluctantly acquiesced in by the government of India — and of the more liberal end of the press. It was intimately bound up with changes in forms of colonial rule, symbolized by the Montagu-Chelmsford reform scheme of 1919, which provided for limited Indian participation in some areas of government on the road to eventual dominion status.¹⁸ It is this official version which has set the terms for much of the historiography. The other view I will look at

¹⁷ Quoted in *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1920.

¹⁸ Montagu's moral and personal commitment to his reforms was undoubted. He was appointed secretary of state for India in June 1917; between November 1917 and May 1918 he toured India, consulting and cajoling. His personal diary of this tour was published posthumously by his wife as Edwin S. Montagu, *An Indian Diary*, ed. V. Montagu (London, 1930); in it he remarks — referring to his Jewishness — that "there is some truth in the allegation that I am an Oriental. Certainly that social relationship which English people find so difficult comes quite easily to me" (*ibid.*, p. 17). The aim of the reforms, as he defined it in the House of Commons on 20 August 1917, was "the gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realisation of responsible government as an integral part of the British Empire": *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), xcvi, col. 1695.

here is the version espoused by Dyer's many supporters. It was anchored in the social rituals and practices of rule of the post-Mutiny era in India.¹⁹ It was also, and not incidentally, linked with struggles going on at the time in Ireland: Sir Edward Carson was one of Dyer's most passionate advocates. If not the majority view at the time, it undoubtedly commanded very wide assent. It also, I shall argue, makes sense — of a sort — of the massacre. Antecedent events alone do not: what is critical is the meanings that were put on them.

II

Disaffection was widespread in India in 1919.²⁰ The war had led to much hardship, and the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms were widely seen as poor recompense. Annie Besant spoke for many when she called them "unworthy of Britain to offer or India to accept";²¹ they were rejected by both Congress and the Muslim League. The Rowlatt Bills — the immediate target of Indian protests early in 1919 — added insult to injury. The first bill passed into law on 21 March as the Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act. It provided for the trial of political offenders by three High Court judges, with no jury or right of appeal. Trials could take place in camera, and hear evidence which would not be admissible under the Indian Evidence Act. The executive was empowered to arrest, search without warrant and confine suspects without trial for renewable periods of up to a year. The second Rowlatt Bill, eventually dropped, would also have made possession of seditious publications an imprisonable offence. Indian politicians fought a fierce campaign against Rowlatt, and demonstrations took place across India. Gandhi's satyagraha movement was launched in Bombay. There was rioting in Ahmedabad, Delhi and several districts of the Punjab.

¹⁹ There is no space to do more than allude to this; but I want to underline the historical specificity of the set of moral attitudes I trace here. "Colonial" attitudes changed over time (and not always to the more "liberal"), in part in response to the struggles of the colonized, as after the "Mutiny". There is a good brief discussion in V. G. Kiernan, *The Lords of Human Kind* (London, 1972). Fiction is a good source for Anglo-Indian attitudes during this period, notably that of Kipling, especially his early stories, in R. Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills* (London, 1888); R. Kipling, *Wee Willie Winkie* (London, 1888). Forster's *Passage to India* is also seminal.

²⁰ Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, introduction, ch. 1, is excellent on the wartime and immediate post-war background. Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, ch.3, discusses the period 1858-1919.

²¹ Quoted in Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 28.

Sir Michael O'Dwyer, the lieutenant-governor of the Punjab from 1913 to 1919, had a reputation for "tough" rule. His allegedly coercive recruiting practices during the war (the Punjab, with some 7.5 per cent of India's population, supplied some 60 per cent of the troops recruited there) added specific local grievances to those general throughout India.²² O'Dwyer's Anglo-Irish background — he was one of the fourteen children of a middling landlord — is not irrelevant to his perceptions of what his job demanded of him: "he knew from boyhood", says Philip Mason, "what conspiracy and outrage mean to peaceful folk".²³ General Dyer too had formative early experiences in Ireland, having been educated at Middleton College, County Cork. O'Dwyer was, according to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, "a warm sympathiser with the rural classes", but firmly believed in "the necessity of British control of India for that country's welfare".²⁴ He opposed the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms. During the war he had ruthlessly crushed dissent — most notably the *Ghadr* organization launched by Sikhs in North America — muzzled the Indian press and prevented Indian activists from entering the Punjab. Controls on the press were stepped up early in 1919.

There had been several protest meetings in Amritsar itself over Rowlatt, leading to a *hartal*²⁵ on 30 March 1919. The Punjab government prohibited two of the organizers of the protests, Drs. Satyapal and Kitchlew, from speaking in public, communicating with the press or leaving Amritsar. A second *hartal* was set for 6 April. At a meeting of fifty thousand people two demands were made: the repeal of Rowlatt and the rescinding of the orders against Kitchlew and Satyapal. The *hartal* passed off without violence. None the less Miles Irving, the deputy commissioner, requested an increase in military forces to defend the Civil Lines, the area outside Amritsar proper where the Europeans lived.

On 9 April there was a Hindu religious festival, *Ram Naumi*.

²² The majority report of the Hunter Committee denied that recruitment was a factor in the 1919 Punjab disturbances: *Hunter Committee*, p. 1066; Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, pp. 9-20, makes a convincing and well-documented case to the contrary.

²³ P. Woodruff [Philip Mason], *The Men Who Ruled India*, 2 vols. (London, 1953-4), ii, p. 238.

²⁴ See M. O'Dwyer, *India as I Knew It: 1885-1925* (London, 1925), for his views.

²⁵ A *hartal* is a cessation of ordinary activity, in effect a general strike. It has religious connotations. Murli Dhar explained in the *Tribune*, 13 Apr. 1919: "What is Hartal? . . . when the dead body of the Rowlatt Acts is still in our midst, we have suspended all business and must remove the corpse from the house before the people can break their fast and resume business".

Remarkable scenes of “fraternization” between Hindus and Muslims, including the public sharing of water-vessels, were witnessed — uneasily — by Miles Irving. The Hunter Report later commented that “in Amritsar as elsewhere efforts towards ‘unity’ had been made largely indeed frankly in a political interest”, such co-operation of “the warring creeds” testifying to the influence of Kitchlew and other leaders.²⁶ That evening Irving received orders from O’Dwyer for the arrest, deportation from Amritsar and detention of Kitchlew and Satyapal. It was decided to invite the two men to Irving’s bungalow at 10 a.m. the next day, and spirit them out of Amritsar. Pickets were to be posted to defend the Civil Lines, and plans were laid for the evacuation of European women and children to the Gobindgarh fort.

On 10 April the news of the deportation of Satyapal and Kitchlew spread swiftly, and crowds — who by then knew also of Gandhi’s arrest the previous evening — collected rapidly. They moved through the centre of the city, heading for the Civil Lines where they intended to protest against the arrests at Irving’s bungalow. At this stage, there was no violence, and Europeans encountered by the crowd were not molested. Nor was any property attacked. But at two of the bridges separating the city from the Civil Lines there was bloodshed. In both cases it would seem that the crowds pushed forward, resorted eventually to stoning the troops, and were fired upon. Prominent local lawyers tried to intercede: one of them, Maqbool Mahmood, claimed that “if the authorities had a little more patience we would have succeeded in taking the crowd back”.²⁷ The firing — official figures give twelve dead and twenty to thirty wounded — changed the temper of the crowd.

By the end of the day many buildings had been looted and burned down, and five Europeans had been beaten to death. One such assault, the attack on the manager of the City Mission School, Miss Sherwood — who was left for dead, but was given first aid by Hindu shopkeepers — was particularly to incense Dyer, who

²⁶ *Hunter Committee*, p. 1024. Note how “communal” antipathy is taken as “normal” here, while its *absence* is disturbing and artificial. Such conceptions served as justifications for British rule. It is open to question how much the sort of conceptions evidenced here were actively constitutive of the communal violence they portray as endemically “native”. Social identities are not just given, they are made, in part through the forms through which power is exercised.

²⁷ Quoted in Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 76. Mahmood was afterwards put under pressure to give false evidence: see Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, p. 38.

arrived in Amritsar late the next evening to take effective control of the city from the civil authorities. The rest of the European women and children were safely ensconced in the fort by 4 p.m. on 10 April. The railway lines had been damaged, and telegraph and telephone wires cut. Word came in, magnified by rumour, of riot, murder and arson elsewhere in the Punjab.

III

Grave as the situation in Amritsar on Dyer's arrival undoubtedly was, it does not fully account for what happened at Jallianwala two days later. For by 13 April, the beleaguered garrison had been amply reinforced, and no further violence had broken out; indeed "ringleaders" were being arrested on 12 April. Dyer's shooting was not necessitated, in any military sense, by the situation in Amritsar. To comprehend the massacre we need to look beyond the events I have outlined.

It is revealing, however, of both the moral relations involved and the way these continue to haunt the historiography, that a simple narrative of the events which culminated in the rioting of 10 April *has* frequently served as justification for the massacre, beginning with an article "By an Englishwoman" in *Blackwood's Magazine* for April 1920. This is an eye-witness account of the riots of 10 April and the crowded, insanitary and servantless conditions suffered by the European women and children "who had never known a day's real hardship before" in the fort during the next few days. It concluded that "General Dyer's action alone saved them".²⁸ The author felt no need to explain how or why this was so: she simply took it to be self-evident. In a much later book (1981), Alfred Draper achieves much the same effect by his liberal use of purple prose: the "mobs" were "frenzied" and "half-crazed", their cries "like the howling of wolves".²⁹ Knowingly or otherwise he echoes Dyer's contemporary supporters. "A Planter" wrote in 1920 to the *Calcutta Statesman*, berating twenty-five missionaries who had had the temerity to criticize Dyer's "Prussianism": "I wonder if they will think of the man whom they have helped to malign if ever they have the experience

²⁸ "Amritsar: By an Englishwoman", *Blackwood's Mag.*, ccvii (1920), pp. 444, 446.

²⁹ Draper, *Amritsar*, pp. 64 ff. I do not suggest he is being deliberately racist: the point is the clichéd "appropriateness" of such narrative devices. The chapter is entitled "Murder, Looting and Arson", not, for instance, "Duplicity, Repression and Resistance", as it might be from a different viewpoint.

of being chased by a maddened mob of coolies who are out for their blood".³⁰ Draper's mob, too, bayed for "white blood".³¹

What is conveyed through the silences in the anonymous Englishwoman's account and the imagery of Draper's narrative is that, contrary to Lord Birkenhead's argument in the debate on Dyer in the Lords, conduct was called for in Amritsar which would have been unthinkable "in Glasgow or Belfast or Winnipeg".³² That it was British actions — from the flagrant disregard of "due process" in Rowlatt, to the arrest and deportation of Kitchlew and Satyapal and the initial British firing at the bridges — which provoked Indian retaliation, or that far more Indians (who remain nameless) than Europeans were killed or wounded on 10 April, let alone 13 April, is lost sight of. India is represented as a different moral universe: violence by British and Indians is not equivalent. Fein has made this point in her study. It is an important one. The otherness of India — an otherness which was nurtured in the social distancing fundamental to British life in, and rule of, India — was fundamental to the legitimation of the actions of Dyer and others, enabling their transmutation from what would otherwise be seen as crimes into moral acts. Fein's conclusion, that colonial rulers exclude the ruled from their own domain of moral obligation, is, however, an oversimplification.³³

It is certainly true that different moral standards were applied to British and Indian actions. But this does not mean that the British recognized no obligations towards Indians. On the contrary, Dyer's actions were defended by contemporaries just because he *had* acted morally — dutifully — according to the canons of mutual obligation between rulers and ruled, as they were defined by the former. This is, in many ways, what is most revealing in British responses to Jallianwala, for it testifies to what is always a key dimension of rule. Legitimation is as centrally a matter of authorizing the actions of rulers as of securing the compliance of the ruled; and it is better analysed as an essential, animating component of power than as its mere *post festum* "rationalization". Morality, in the context of governance, colonial

³⁰ *Statesman* [Calcutta], 20 July 1920. I owe this reference to E. P. Thompson.

³¹ Draper, *Amritsar*, p. 71.

³² *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Lords), xli, col. 279. The Winnipeg reference is to the general strike of May–June 1919.

³³ Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, *passim*: it is her major explanatory hypothesis, building on Emile Durkheim.

or otherwise, is far more than “ideology”.³⁴ “British India” rested as firmly on a set of moral relations as it did on bayonets or bullets. Underpinning these is a positive construction of Indians as particular sorts of subject, in a way which Draper’s book echoes, sixty years on.³⁵ It was this which permitted a coherent moral defence of Dyer’s action, and goes far towards explaining it.

IV

Certain other British actions during that spring in the Punjab provide us with one point of entry into this (intensely) moral universe. On 15 April martial law was imposed on Amritsar and four other districts of the Punjab. At O’Dwyer’s behest it was backdated to 30 March, in order “to deal appropriately with the local leaders whose speeches during the preceding fortnight did so much to inflame classes who have joined the disturbances”.³⁶ This meant that Kitchlew and Satyapal, despite being in custody on 10 April, could still be tried under martial-law regulations, which created summary courts under one or more military officers, and set up four martial-law commissions for more serious cases. The latter sat in camera, were not obliged to record evidence, and permitted only limited cross-examination. Choice of counsel was in any case severely restricted since outside lawyers were banned from the Punjab. Of the 852 accused, 581 were convicted; 108 were sentenced to death, and 264 (including Kitchlew and Satyapal, convicted on the testimony of an “official approver”³⁷) to transportation for life. There was no appeal. Most of these martial-law commission sentences (after much protest about procedure; a later judicial review generally vindicated the protestors) were commuted by royal proclamation in December 1919. But by then eighteen men had been publicly hanged.

In the summary courts flogging was the normal punishment.

³⁴ On this point, see, further, P. Corrigan and D. Sayer, *The Great Arch: English State Formation as Cultural Revolution* (New York and Oxford, 1985).

³⁵ On the sense in which I am using “positivity” here, see any of Michel Foucault’s later writings, but particularly M. Foucault, “The Subject and Power”, *Critical Inquiry*, viii (1982); for the construction of knowledge in/of India, see B. Cohn, *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1988).

³⁶ Telegram from chief secretary of Punjab government to secretary of government of India, quoted in Draper, *Amritsar*, p. 125.

³⁷ Hans Raj, who may have been an *agent provocateur*. See *ibid.*, pp. 58-62, 79-80, 86-7, 128-36.

In around half the cases it was done publicly: there are reports from Lahore of European spectators enthusiastically urging the wielders of the cane to strike harder. A wedding party was flogged for being an illegal gathering, and a group of men were whipped before an audience of prostitutes for visiting a brothel during curfew. There are numerous accounts by Indian witnesses of attempts to coerce them, both physically and otherwise, into giving false evidence.³⁸

Collective punishments were widely imposed. In Amritsar, water and electricity supplies were shut off. Vehicles, including bicycles, were commandeered; so were fans, for the relief of soldiers. The issue of third- and intermediate-class rail tickets was suspended, effectively barring Indians from the railways. A strict curfew remained in force. In Lahore students were expelled from colleges, not on the basis of proven participation in the disturbances, but by quota. Students were also forced to march up to seventeen miles a day in the sun. In Chuhan Kara peasants were forbidden to harvest their crops. There were cases of attempted aerial bombing, in one instance of a girls' school, in another of a mosque.

But what most distinguishes many of the martial-law orders was their ritualistically humiliating character. Thus Captain Doveton in Kasur, the man who devised the whipping in front of the prostitutes, numbered among his "fancy punishments" making people skip, recite poems and touch the ground with their noses. It is also alleged that he had people whitewashed. In Malawakal and Sheikupura all males were made to do the work of sweepers — untouchables — which, for Hindus, is polluting. In Amritsar Dyer had all the lawyers in the city act as "special constables". Their "policing duties" included menial work and the witnessing of floggings. Orders requiring salaaming, saluting and descending from transport were widely promulgated. The text of one such order runs as follows:

Whereas it has come to my notice that certain inhabitants of the Gujranwala District are habitually exhibiting a lack of respect for gazetted or commissioned European Civil and Military Officers of His Majesty's Service,

³⁸ Evidence of martial-law abuses, judicial and otherwise, cited here is taken mainly from the Hunter Committee report. The fullest source is the *Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Punjab Sub-Committee of the Indian National Congress*, 2 vols. (Bombay, 1920). Congress boycotted the Hunter Committee and established its own inquiry into the disorders, denounced as "biased" by Anglo-Indians because Gandhi was one of its members. See also Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, ch. 2.

thereby failing to maintain the dignity of that Government: I hereby order that the inhabitants of the Gujranwala District shall accord to all such officers, whenever met, the salutation usually accorded to Indian gentlemen of high social position in accordance with the customs of India. That is to say, persons riding on animals or on or in wheeled conveyances will alight, persons carrying opened and raised umbrellas shall lower them, and all persons shall salute or "salaam" with the hand.³⁹

Questioned by the Hunter Committee on this order, Lieutenant-Colonel O'Brien, district commissioner at Gujranwala, commented: "The tendency of the present day is to abolish respectfulness. The Indian father will tell you that sons are not respectful even to their parents".⁴⁰ One man, at Wazirabad, is alleged to have been made to lick an officer's boots for failing to salute. The most notorious order of this kind, however, was Dyer's.

On 19 April he visited the badly wounded Miss Sherwood, and "searched his brain for a suitable punishment". He closed the street where she had been assaulted, erected a whipping triangle at one end, posted pickets and ordered that any person wishing to pass through the street (including its residents) had to do so on all fours. In practice people had to squirm through the filth of the lane on their bellies, prodded along by the boots and bayonets of the soldiers. Prisoners were deliberately routed through the "Crawling Lane". Dyer later explained:

It is a complete misunderstanding to suppose that I meant this order to be an insulting mark of race inferiority. The order meant that the street should be regarded as holy ground, and that, to mark this fact, no one was to traverse it except in a manner in which a place of special sanctity might naturally in the East be traversed. My object was not merely to impress the inhabitants, but to appeal to their moral sense in a way which I knew they would understand.⁴¹

Within the "Crawling Lane", at the same time, a building sacred to Hindus was defiled, and "the wells . . . were polluted by the soldiers easing themselves near them".⁴² Six youths were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the assault on Miss Sherwood. Dyer, dispensing with the niceties of a trial, had them flogged there. Even O'Dwyer found Dyer's crawling order unacceptable, rescinding it on 25 April.

³⁹ *Hunter Committee*, pp. 1087-8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1127.

⁴¹ *Disturbances in the Punjab: Statement by Brig.-General R. E. H. Dyer, C.B., P.P.*, 1920 (Cmd. 771), xxxiv, pp. 677-704 (hereafter *Statement to the Army Council*), p. 693.

⁴² Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, p. 42, quoting the Indian National Congress report. She aptly notes the symbolism.

There is a systematic pattern to these events. Martial law, declared after the major disturbances had been put down, served to facilitate punishment rather than to control disorder. There was scant regard for the hallowed principles of British justice. The hasty passage by the Indian government of an Act of Indemnity in October 1919, which sought "to protect from legal proceedings *bona fide* action taken with a reasonable belief that it was necessary to suppress disorder", conveyed essentially the same message. Individual guilt was neither here nor there, on either side. Many martial-law punishments were openly and onerously collective, and collectively — that is to say, racially — degrading. They underlined the social distance between rulers and ruled. Dyer's crawling order epitomizes the symbolism: including the elevation of white womanhood, the ultimate taboo for the Indian male, to sacredness. It is worth underlining the recurrence of the theme of "violation" (Miss Sherwood was not raped) in contemporary images of these events.⁴³ The sacred, as Emile Durkheim observed, is that which is "*set apart, that which is separated*"; "any mixture, or even contact, *profanes* it". The sacred and the profane are "heterogeneous and incommensurable".⁴⁴ What was being restored in the Punjab was a properly hierarchized and duly sanctified moral order.

V

Immediately after the massacre Dyer had sought and obtained approval for his actions from his commanding officer, General Beynon, and O'Dwyer. He was widely lauded as "the saviour of the Punjab". He claimed (as did others, then and later) that he enjoyed the support of loyal Indians:

the leading men from the district came forward to me and offered me 10,000 Sikhs to fight for the Raj, and invited me to command them. I and my Brigade Officer received the unusual honour of being made Sikhs, and

⁴³ Apart from instances cited in my text, see *The Times*, 1 June 1920, on "incitements to the mob at Lyallpur to outrage Englishwomen". The two novels from which I have taken the quotes which open this paper both have as their centrepiece rapes: in Paul Scott, *The Jewel in the Crown* (*Raj Quartet*, i) though the heroine is raped, the man punished was not the rapist, but her (Indian) lover; in *A Passage to India*, Forster leaves it open whether a rape occurred at all. Both heroines are "naïve" English outsiders, strangers to the Raj and its codes.

⁴⁴ E. Durkheim, *Sociology and Philosophy*, trans. D. F. Pocock (New York, 1974), p. 70.

I was acclaimed on various occasions by native gatherings as the officer who had saved the situation.⁴⁵

The manager of the Golden Temple, where Dyer was allegedly made an honorary Sikh, Arur Singh, was a government appointee, and martial law was in force. Both the temple authorities and the Sikh League issued a prompt denunciation of the British use of the temple for political purposes. But the story was to be made much of "at home", where it was taken as confirmation of the gratitude of the "loyal native". The symbolism of this incident is as instructive as that of the "Crawling Lane".

On 8 May 1919 Dyer left Amritsar to fight on the Afghan border. In August he filed his official report to the general staff, 16th Indian Division, on his actions in Amritsar. Then confident that he enjoyed the full support of his superiors, Dyer was far less guarded than in some of his later statements. He considered it his "bounden duty" to fire on the crowd. He believed in the use of minimum force, but "at Amritsar the case was different". The meeting was held in defiance of his proclamation banning all gatherings, and must have received ample warning of his coming. The villagers there, he understood — without giving any evidence for this belief — had been enticed to the meeting by a promise that their taxes and land revenues would be reduced "as the British 'Raj' was at an end. Evidently those who came believing the British 'Raj' was at an end were themselves not very innocent". He did not suggest that fear of attack by the mob led him to fire. He did make it quite clear that he "had ample time to consider the nature of the painful duty I might be faced with", and "had considered the matter from every point of view". He was, in short, resolved on firing before he reached the Bagh.

On arriving there, "there was no reason to further parley with the mob; evidently they were there to defy the arm of the law". Notice how a peaceful crowd has already become a "mob". Dyer then states, succinctly, exactly why he acted as he did:

The responsibility was very great. If I fired I must fire with good effect, a small amount of firing would be a criminal act of folly. I had the choice of carrying out a very distasteful and horrible duty or of neglecting to do my duty, of suppressing disorder or of becoming responsible for all future bloodshed . . . What faced me was what on the morrow would be the Danda Fauj (Rebel Army). I fired and continued to fire until the crowd dispersed and I consider this the least amount of firing which would produce the necessary moral and widespread effect it was my duty to

⁴⁵ *Statement to the Army Council*, p. 697.

produce, if I was to justify my action. If more troops had been at hand the casualties would have been greater in proportion. It was no longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd, but one of producing a sufficient moral effect, from a military point of view, not only on those who were present but more specially throughout the Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.⁴⁶

It is an astoundingly frank passage. The actual behaviour of the crowd was irrelevant. The point, rather, was that "every man who escaped from the Jallianwala Bagh was a messenger to tell that law and order had been restored in Amritsar". The massacre was an exercise in moral education. Dyer's message, I might add, was pertinent to all those parts of the globe (some one quarter of its land surface at the time) coloured red on British maps. Certainly it was heard as such, whether by Carson or, as we will see, British workers fearful of "Dyerism" at home.

Dyer's report was filed on 25 August. In October he was given permanent command of a brigade, and in January 1920 temporary command of a division. His actions in Amritsar were vigorously defended both in the debate on the Indemnity Bill in the imperial legislative council,⁴⁷ and in the Punjab government's own statement on the disturbances.⁴⁸ But events were beginning to move against him.

Edwin Montagu, secretary of state for India, under pressure in the Commons and from Indian nationalists, had promised in May 1919 to set up an inquiry into the disturbances. Many British in India, including the commander-in-chief of the army, General Sir Charles Monro, the home member of the government of India, Sir William Vincent, and Sir Harcourt Butler, governor of the United Provinces, opposed an inquiry of any sort. They felt it would bring the military into disrepute, provide a platform for Indian militants and inflame "racial feelings". There was much dispute between Montagu and the government of India over the appropriate form and terms of reference of the inquiry. Eventually on 18 July 1919 Montagu had sent Chelmsford a telegram announcing that a committee would be appointed by the govern-

⁴⁶ Passages quoted from Dyer's report are taken from Draper, *Amritsar*, pp. 154-6; *Hunter Committee*, p. 1116.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the speech by the adjutant-general of India, Sir Henry Havelock Hudson, appended by Dyer to his *Statement to the Army Council*, pp. 702-3. See also Draper, *Amritsar*, pp. 158-61.

⁴⁸ *Reports on the Punjab Disturbances, April 1919*, P.P., 1920 (Cmd. 534), xiv, pp. 931-1000. See esp. pp. 938-9, on what were seen as the beneficial results of Dyer's action.

ment of India, with a chairman chosen by the secretary of state. The inquiry would consider not only the causes of the disorders, but also “the measures taken to cope with them”. Lord Hunter’s committee began its hearings on 29 October 1919.

In his testimony, Dyer substantially reiterated what he said in his earlier report, including that “my mind was made up as I came along in my motor car”. When asked whether he had feared attack, he answered, “No . . . I had made up my mind that I would do all men to death if they were going to continue the meeting”. He also confirmed that he would probably have used his machine-guns had he been able to. Questioned on whether his aim had been to produce a “moral effect” throughout the Punjab rather than just to disperse the crowd, Dyer stated:

These were rebels and I must not treat them with gloves on. They had come out to fight if they defied me, and I was going to give them a lesson . . . I was going to punish them. My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression . . . Yes, throughout the Punjab. I wanted to reduce their *moral[e]*; the *moral[e]* of the rebels.

Asked whether such use of terror might not in fact discredit the Raj, he replied “It was a merciful though horrible act and they ought to be thankful to me for doing it . . . I thought it would be doing a jolly lot of good and they would realize that they were not to be wicked”. The childishness of the language here runs throughout Dyer’s testimony, and speaks volumes about his perceptions of Indians and the role of the British in relation to them. Asked later what he meant by saying that his action had a “salutory effect”, Dyer responded: “I want to punish the naughty boy; it would be difficult to say what would be the effect of punishment on a boy who is not naughty”.⁴⁹

Another strand in Dyer’s testimony is equally revealing. Admitting that the crowd began to disperse as soon as he began firing, and probably could well have been dispersed without any firing at all, he explained why he none the less continued firing: “I could disperse them for some time, then they would all come

⁴⁹ Dyer’s testimony, reproduced in *Evidence Taken Before the Disorders Inquiry Committee*, 5 vols. (Calcutta, 1920), iii, pp. 114-39: the quotes in this and the following paragraph are from pp. 117, 123, 126, 131. He disputed parts of the record, including the assertion that he “would do all men to death” — but committee members recall being struck by the oddity of the phrase as he uttered it. Substantial extracts are given in *Hunter Committee* (esp. the minority report); Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*; Draper, *Amritsar*. Two more volumes were withheld from publication by Montagu at Chelmsford’s request: these contained evidence given in camera by O’Dwyer, and by the governments of the Punjab and of India, among others.

back and laugh at me and I considered I would be making myself a fool". He felt no need to elaborate. The importance of maintaining face in India was something he clearly took to be self-evident. Fear of being laughed at may seem a bizarre (not to say an obscene) justification for a massacre, and ample confirmation, if any be needed, of Dyer's pathology. But in this, as in much else, he was merely articulating the consciousness of a caste. "For a century", a former cabinet minister had written in 1892, "the Englishman has behaved in India as a demi-god . . . Any weakening of this confidence in the minds of the English or of the Indians would be dangerous".⁵⁰ Unbridgeable distance was manifested in every detail of Anglo-Indian social life, from the prohibitions on "miscegenation" to the architecture of the Civil Lines. Such distancing sustained the fictional construction of Indians which provided the Raj with its moral underpinnings, if at the cost of fuelling a chronic fear of what lay (in the title of Rudyard Kipling's chilling story) "Beyond the Pale". Representations of power are always integral to its exercise, and they were especially so in post-Mutiny India. The "handful" of British were acutely aware of their vulnerability; they were few, and depended for military security on a largely Indian army. They sought, magically, to wield power through its symbols, adapting caste (the Indian Civil Service called themselves the "heaven-born"), appropriating the *Durbar*. Dyer was simply voicing the commonplace.

VI

The Hunter Committee report — or more accurately reports, for the committee split, on racial lines — was submitted to the government of India on 8 March 1920. The majority censured Dyer for firing without giving the assembly a chance to disperse, and for continuing to fire after it had already started to do so. His justification in terms of the "moral effect" his action would produce elsewhere was "a mistaken conception of his duty". There was no firm evidence of a conspiracy to overthrow British power, or basis for the belief that Dyer had "saved the situation in the Punjab and averted a rebellion on a scale similar to the Mutiny". His crawling order was "injudicious" and objectionable

⁵⁰ Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, quoted in Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind*, p. 57.

because it “punished innocent as well as guilty”, an “act of humiliation” causing “bitterness and racial ill-feeling”. Other actions taken under martial law were criticized, and irregularities admitted in the procedures of the summary courts. But such abuses were not seen as systematic, and O’Dwyer and the Punjab government escaped criticism.⁵¹

The minority report, signed by the three Indian members of the committee, was considerably more hostile. Dyer was further rebuked for inadequately publicizing his proclamation prior to the meeting at the Bagh. His firing was condemned as an act of “frightfulness” comparable to German atrocities in France and Belgium, something “inhuman and un-British” — an interesting choice of words. He was criticized for making no provision for the wounded. Martial-law orders “were designed and were used for punitive purposes”. The humiliating features of these orders, their intention of “teaching the Indian population a lesson”, were stressed and amply documented.⁵² The minority were considerably more scathing over the action of the police, military and courts under martial law, and questioned the necessity for its imposition in the first place. They were also far more critical of O’Dwyer, concluding that his “*point of view was and still is the same as that of General Dyer*”⁵³ — not unreasonably, as O’Dwyer’s vigorous advocacy of Dyer’s cause was subsequently to show.

The viceroy’s executive council accepted the majority’s conclusions regarding Dyer. There was near-unanimity that he should be retired from the army, but without being cashiered or otherwise prosecuted. This, in Monro’s words, would “arouse the sentiments of the services”.⁵⁴ On 3 May the government of India wrote to Montagu. Dyer’s action at the Jallianwala Bagh “exceeded the requirements of the case and showed a misconception of his duty”. Dyer however “acted honestly”, and “in the result his action checked the spread of the disturbances”. It was “with pain” that the government was requesting the commander-in-chief to take appropriate action. This exonerating language may have genuinely reflected the government of India’s view, or may have been a sop to Anglo-Indian public opinion; in any event, it

⁵¹ *Hunter Committee, passim*; quotes from pp. 1034, 1035, 1087.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 1112: a subheading in the minority report. See also pp. 1119, 1122.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 1118.

⁵⁴ Quoted by Datta, *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 134, who gives a detailed account of these discussions.

is indicative of what the latter was. Despite “irregularities” and “injudicious and irresponsible acts” in the administration of martial law, no other officers named in the Hunter Report merited censure. As for O’Dwyer, his “decision and vigour . . . [were] largely responsible for quelling a dangerous rising which might have had widespread and disastrous effects on the rest of India”.⁵⁵

The secretary of state’s response, though polite, was much less equivocal. Montagu condemned Dyer’s firing in much stronger terms, and described the crawling order as offending “against every canon of civilised government”. He also took issue with the Hunter majority over martial-law abuses, detecting:

a spirit which prompted — not generally, but unfortunately not uncommonly — the enforcement of punishments and orders calculated, if not intended, to humiliate Indians as a race, to cause unwarranted inconvenience amounting on occasions to injustice, and to flout standards of propriety and humanity, which the inhabitants, not only of India in particular, but of the civilised world in general, have a right to demand of those set in authority over them.⁵⁶

The officers involved should be censured. Montagu also pointed out “the extreme divergence between sentences required by the charges as presented to [martial-law] courts and by the dictates of justice as they presented themselves to the reviewing authorities” in the later judicial review, and criticized O’Dwyer for his part in this, and for his overly hasty support of Dyer’s action at Amritsar. Diplomatic as Montagu’s language unfailingly is, it cannot hide the deep rifts between London and Simla. In private correspondence, Montagu went to the heart of the matter: “I feel that [O’Dwyer] represents a regime that is doomed”.⁵⁷

VII

Dyer landed at Southampton on 3 May 1920. He was interviewed on arrival by the *Daily Mail*. “The General, burnt brick-red by thirty-five years’ service in India . . . with greying hair and kindly blue eyes”,⁵⁸ derided the Hunter Committee and complained that he had been sentenced without trial. Shortly after, he applied to

⁵⁵ This correspondence was published as an addendum to the Hunter Report: *Correspondence between the Government of India and the Secretary of State for India on the Report of Lord Hunter’s Committee*, P.P., 1920 (Cmd. 705), xxxiv, pp. 649-76.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 674.

⁵⁷ Letter from Montagu to Chelmsford: Draper, *Amritsar*, p. 212, quotes this, without supplying date or source location.

⁵⁸ *Daily Mail*, 4 May 1920.

the India Office for leave to state his case to the army council. Montagu, in the meantime, had asked for legal advice on whether or not further action could be taken against Dyer.⁵⁹ The burden of Sir Edward des Chamier's note was that Dyer could indeed be tried for culpable homicide under the Indian penal code, but that any jury in either India or England would be likely to acquit him. Montagu's cabinet committee decided to do all it could to forestall any private prosecution being brought.

Among Dyer's supporters were military members of the army council. Sir Henry Wilson, chief of the imperial general staff, insisted, against cabinet pressure, upon Dyer being given the opportunity to submit a statement in his defence. He wrote in his diary, after a particularly stormy meeting with Churchill, "The Frocks [politicians] have got India (as they have Ireland) into a filthy mess. On that the soldiers are called in to act. This is disapproved of by all the disloyal elements and the soldier is thrown to the winds".⁶⁰ Speculation was rife in the press that the army council would repudiate the findings of the Hunter Committee; indeed the *Guardian* reported this as fact.⁶¹ *The Times* cautioned that: "it has been accepted in this country since the day when Charles I lost his head [that] the civil power should be supreme over the military power. Are the relative positions of the Army Council and the Cabinet at this juncture a violation of this principle?".⁶² The ritual invocation — which is to say, the reconstruction — of British "tradition" was to be a dominant motif of these debates, on both sides. Even the Indian minority on Lord Hunter's committee chose to condemn Dyer in terms of his "un-British" behaviour. In the event, the army council endorsed the removal of Dyer from his command, but did not feel any further action was called for.

O'Dwyer, meantime, published a statement on 9 June which branded the Hunter Committee's composition as "defective" and

⁵⁹ Draper, *Amritsar*, pp. 217-19, gives a detailed account of this incident, based on cabinet papers closed until 1971.

⁶⁰ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 222. In linking India and Ireland (as well as in his pronounced anti-Bolshevism) he was representative of many of Dyer's prominent supporters. There is, of course, an older and deeper intertwining of various "Indians" and Ireland in English discourses: see J. Muldoon, "Indian as Irishman", *Essex Hist. Institutes*, iii (1975). Wilson was assassinated in 1922 by Sinn Féin, against whom, as the *Dictionary of National Biography* puts it, "he never ceased to advocate a system of drastic coercion".

⁶¹ *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July 1920.

⁶² *The Times*, 26 June 1920, editorial, "A Constitutional Question".

denounced its minority as "not impartial". He also implied that Montagu had misled parliament and the public, providing evidence of this in a further letter of 2 July.⁶³ Montagu had claimed, in the Commons on 16 December 1919, to have first known the details of the Amritsar massacre from press reports the same month. O'Dwyer said he had personally told Montagu on 30 June 1919 of Dyer's having fired without warning, the number of rounds fired, the extent of casualties and the crawling order. On 14 June *The Times* reported "extraordinary interest throughout India" in O'Dwyer's statement, and "intense bitterness of British feeling in India against the Secretary of State". The Anglo-Indian press had condemned Montagu's "mendacity and equivocations". The council of the European Association of India cabled: "General body of Europeans in India strongly uphold Dyer and condemn actions of Government of India and Secretary of State".⁶⁴ Montagu was repeatedly harassed in the Commons.⁶⁵

Correspondence in the press pointed to Indian support for Dyer's action (some citing the Sikh investiture),⁶⁶ the participation of villagers who were not "innocent and ignorant" in the riots and looting,⁶⁷ and the reality of conspiracy in India.⁶⁸ Though some letters were critical, most supported Dyer.⁶⁹ One man who had served under him offered a testimonial.⁷⁰ Carlyon Bellairs captures the tone of much of this correspondence:

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 9 June, 2 July 1920.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 10 June 1920, letter from G. Morgan.

⁶⁵ See *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxx, cols. 2149-54 — Montagu's claims here flatly contradict those of O'Dwyer in his letter of 2 July, so one of them was lying; *ibid.*, cxxxi, cols. 452-4, 1411-21. In the latter case, Montagu was criticized for the release of Mohammed Bashir, sentenced to death by a martial-law commission for his alleged part in the Amritsar riots, then released after the later judicial review; see also Gwynne's speech in the Dyer debate of 8 July and the exchange of 14 July, when Montagu was accused of pressurizing the Indian government to change its line on Dyer: *ibid.*, cxxxi, cols. 1793-804, 2347-51.

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 1 June 1920, letters from Lord Sydenham and Constance Tuting; see also the later letters of Sydenham and Lord Lamington: *ibid.*, 13, 23 July 1920, respectively.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 4 June 1920, letter from S. R. Purnell.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 July 1920, letter from Sydenham; see also letter from "Freelance", *ibid.*, 8 June 1920, defending Dyer's "moral effect" argument.

⁶⁹ Exceptions, apart from those otherwise cited here, were from J. D. Rees (*ibid.*, 10 July 1920); K. S. Gupta (*ibid.*, 26 July 1920); J. Callan and others (*Manchester Guardian*, 6 July 1920). On 14 July 1920 the *Calcutta Statesman* published a letter from twenty-five missionaries attacking the "Prussianism" of Dyer's action — it unleashed a flood of invective.

⁷⁰ *The Times*, 1 June 1920.

The [Dyer] controversy may, indeed, be a turning point in our Imperial history. British rule has been respected because it has been wisely strong without being cruel, and because the word of the Englishman was his bond . . . under democracy there has been a progressive decline in both these directions . . . Chatham gave his men a free hand. He certainly censured for sins of omission, but one would be surprised to come upon any episode in his career where he excitedly censured the too thorough execution of any task . . . In the wake of every great achievement, as in Dyer's case, there is dust and dirt . . . When a handful of whites are faced by hundreds of thousands of fanatical natives, one cannot apply one's John Stuart Mill.⁷¹

The Oxford Union, in a debate on 10 June, upheld the government stance on Dyer, but very narrowly. The majority was 130 to 121.

There was one sharply different response, which I have touched on already. The Labour Party Conference at Scarborough unanimously passed a resolution on 24 June which denounced the "cruel and barbarous actions" of British officers in the Punjab, and called for their trial, the recall of O'Dwyer and Chelmsford, and the repeal of repressive legislation. Delegates "rose in their places as a tribute to 'India's martyred dead' ".⁷² This undoubtedly reflects a wider working-class identification with the victims of Jallianwala, and fear that their strikes might meet with the same treatment. Perceptions of popular struggles as Bolshevik-inspired conspiracies were not confined to the Punjab, nor to Sir Michael O'Dwyer. This was 1920, and the papers were full of Bolshevik atrocities. The *Guardian*, sensitive to these fears, editorialized against "our well-to-do Prussians" and the Labour resolution, which it saw as extremist.⁷³ The point, of course, was to individualize the massacre as Dyer's purely personal misjudgment, a process now well under way.

VIII

Dyer's case was debated in the Commons on 8 July 1920.⁷⁴ *The Times's* plea that there were more important issues facing India — "We do not welcome the prospect of an Amritsar day in the

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1920.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 25 June 1920.

⁷³ See *Manchester Guardian*, 8, 19 July 1920.

⁷⁴ See *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, cols. 1705-820. All of the books on the massacre cited above give fairly full coverage. *The Times*, 9 July 1920, devoted almost two full pages to the debate, giving the speeches verbatim, as well as printing Dyer's (lengthy) statement to the army council in full.

House of Commons”⁷⁵ — fell on deaf ears. Most British papers gave it lead editorials, *The Times* opining that Dyer’s crawling order was a “lamentable betrayal of the British tradition of equanimity and restraint”, while his censure alone had “served to restore the reputation of British justice in the eyes of India . . . Events such as those at Amritsar . . . obscure our national purpose and betray the ideals which inspire it”. Similar arguments were put forward in the *Guardian* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Both Dyer and O’Dwyer, as well as a number of Indian princes, were in the gallery. The benches were more crowded than for a year, except — a sign of the times — for some debates on Russia. The atmosphere was “electric”.⁷⁶ For the *Pall Mall Gazette*, “Clubman” reported that “I have seldom seen feeling run so high”.⁷⁷

Montagu opened for the government. He asked members: “Are you going to keep your hold upon India by terrorism, racial humiliation and subordination, and frightfulness, or are you going to rest it upon the goodwill, and the growing goodwill, of the people of your Indian Empire? I believe that to be the whole question at issue”.⁷⁸ Carson, the next to speak, shifted the ground — dramatically. He concurred with Montagu on how India should be governed. He was being less than ingenuous here: Carson’s advocacy of Dyer was not unrelated to considerations of methods of government for Ireland. And indeed almost all the anti-government votes at the close of the debate were cast by coalition Unionists, while Ulster members were disproportionately represented. In one way, crystal clear at the time, the whole Dyer controversy was a thinly coded discussion of Ireland, then in open revolt. And of more. The *Guardian* next day observed that “General Dyer’s more thorough supporters by no means intend to stop at India . . . After India, Ireland. After Ireland, British workmen on strike”.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *The Times*, 3 June 1920, editorial, when the issue of a “Dyer debate” was first raised.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 8 July 1920.

⁷⁷ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 July 1920. *The Times*, 9 July 1920, likewise reported that “the most remarkable aspect of the debate was the bitter feeling shown towards Mr Montagu . . . No attack of such concentrated violence on an individual Minister has been made since . . . coalition government began”.

⁷⁸ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1708.

⁷⁹ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1920. The editorial characterized the vote as a “Unionist revolt”; it also expressed concern about how “every Indian demagogue of the future” might use Jallianwala.

But the issue before the House, Carson continued, was not the governance of India. It was whether Dyer had been fairly treated; and manifestly he had not:

You talk of the great principles of liberty which you have laid down. General Dyer has a right to be brought within those principles of liberty. He has no right to be broken on the *ipse dixit* of any Commission or Committee, however great, unless he has been fairly tried — and he has not been tried.

Carson concluded, to “loud and prolonged cheers”: “to break a man under the circumstances of this case is un-English”.⁸⁰

Churchill and Asquith replied: they have been quoted above. Churchill too played on the theme of national character: “Such ideas [‘frightfulness’] are absolutely foreign to the British way of doing things”, and Dyer’s censure was needed to make this “absolutely clear”.⁸¹ Ben Spoor put the Labour view. Sir William Joynson-Hicks quoted a letter from Miss Sherwood and pointed out the overwhelming support Dyer had among the British community in India. He also claimed (instancing Dyer’s claim of being made an “honorary Sikh”) that “General Dyer was and is to-day beloved of the Sikh nation”. Brigadier-General Surtees bluntly opined that if a plebiscite were held in India on who should rule, it would go against Britain; and drew the moral “if we do not hold India by moral suasion, then we must hold it by force”. Surtees, like Dyer and O’Brien, was sensitive to issues of face. White rule would be overwhelmed throughout the empire, he asserted, “but for one thing. That one thing is British prestige. Once you destroy that British prestige, then the Empire will collapse like a house of cards”. Colonel Wedgewood was as zealous in his concern for British prestige, but drew different conclusions:

The principal charge I make against Dyer is not that he shot down Indians, but that he placed on English history the gravest blot since in days gone by we burned Joan of Arc . . . The safety of women and children, even, is of no importance compared with the honour of England.

His priorities are instructive. Bonar Law, in closing for the government, reiterated that Dyer’s “moral effect” argument was “a principle opposed to the whole of the British Empire”. When the vote was taken the government won by 230 to 129. There were many abstentions on the government side. Had not almost all of

⁸⁰ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxix, cols. 1712, 1719.

⁸¹ See above, p. 131; *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxix, cols. 1729, 1730.

the sixty-six Labour and Independent Liberal members voted with the government, Carson's motion would have passed.⁸²

The Commons vote was welcomed by the *Guardian* ("No British tribunal, however constituted, could fail to condemn the action taken at Amritsar"; the Lords were shortly to prove this benign self-image quite wrong)⁸³ and the *Observer* ("There is no question of moral turpitude. General Dyer was not the conscious and bloodthirsty author of a massacre . . . [But] his judgement was lamentably, fatally and tragically at fault").⁸⁴ In acrimonious correspondence to the press, Sydenham deplored the decision of the army council, which would "disastrously affect the interests of all loyal Indians", who could hardly now be counted upon to "stand by the handful of English men and women in India" if their own government did not.⁸⁵ The M.P. Ronald McNeill (whose assessment of the relative importance of Indian lives and British prestige also bears remarking) vilified Montagu: to proclaim "to the world without a scrap of justification that a large section, or any section, of the House of Commons favours terrorism, frightfulness and racial humiliation for India" was "a more mischievous error of judgement than General Dyer's".⁸⁶

The Lords debated the issue two weeks later.⁸⁷ The *Guardian* said it was impossible to justify a debate at all: the affair was best decently buried.⁸⁸ But it was by all accounts a glittering occasion. "There was a really brilliant scene in the House of Lords last night . . . Not since before the war", wrote "Clubman", "has there been such a gathering of peeresses, and the Stranger's Gallery was crowded with distinguished Anglo-Indians and Indians. The Indians, many of them, wore gorgeous turbans, and the ladies wonderful robes of silk".⁸⁹ The recently invested duke of

⁸² For above quotes, see *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, cols. 1762, 1777, 1775, 1788, 1811.

⁸³ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1920.

⁸⁴ *Observer*, 11 July 1920, editorial "The Dyer Case and the Soul of the Empire".

⁸⁵ *The Times*, 13 July 1920. Sydenham drew the Irish parallel: "The decision of the Army Council will carry not peace but the sword to an India dominated, like Ireland, by intimidation".

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 16 July 1920.

⁸⁷ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Lords), xli, cols. 221-308, 311-78.

⁸⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1920, editorial; *The Times* in its report (20 July 1920) of the first day of the debate (19 July 1920) likewise opined: "the material is wearing thin". Five days earlier its "Political Notes" had reported that the government was "straining every nerve to secure a favourable outcome" in the debate.

⁸⁹ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 July 1920.

York (the future George VI) chose this occasion to attend his first Lords debate.⁹⁰ Among the sixteen speakers were five former governors of Indian provinces, one former viceroy, and three former secretaries of state for India. Only six of them supported Viscount Finlay's motion that "this House deplores the conduct of the case of General Dyer as unjust to that officer and as establishing a precedent dangerous to the preservation of order in the face of rebellion". Nevertheless the motion passed, by a majority of 129 to 86. Dyer was present at the debate, and "pleased with the division . . . many peers greeted him afterwards in the lobby".⁹¹ *The Times* profoundly regretted the decision.⁹² The *Guardian* commented:

A vote in favour — even indirectly — of "Prussianism" in India by a House representing especially the old British "governing classes" must not merely do harm in India . . . It must also do harm at home, where the minds of a dangerously large number of workmen are already possessed with the explosive idea that the "capitalist" classes are working themselves up to an attempt to re-establish their declining power with machine-guns.⁹³

The Dyer lobby's "obduracy in a course inspired by contempt for subject races and by fear of popular movements", it added, by now inevitably, "is too Bourbon or Hohenzollern to be quite English".

Lord Sumner's passionate speech in Dyer's defence merits quotation at length. It too sounds a very English refrain:

If General Dyer had been tried — tried in any form that you like, such as enables a man to have it called a trial — he would have been entitled to have a definite charge formulated against him in writing before the Inquiry began, so far as it related to him; he would have been entitled to know what the charge was; he would have been entitled to know who was to be called against him; he would have been entitled to cross-examine those persons and to call witnesses to answer them; he would have been entitled to be represented; he would have been entitled to be present at every stage of the hearing, and he would have been entitled if he chose, to offer himself as a witness, with the protection of advisers if he gave evidence, not in the capacity of a person charged, but in the capacity of a person who, as an officer of the Government, was bound to give an account of his doings.

He would have been entitled then to be warned that there were certain

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 July 1920.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *The Times*, 21 July 1920, editorial, concluding "many Englishmen in the East . . . are out of touch with the newer conditions of imperial rule". Exactly!

⁹³ *Manchester Guardian*, 21 July 1920, editorial, "An Unwise Vote".

questions that he need not answer . . . he was heard without any of these protections.⁹⁴

We are a long way from the Rowlatt Acts, martial-law commissions and summary justice of the “Crawling Lane” and Jallianwala Bagh.

IX

In the run-up to the Commons debate, the *Morning Post* was daily editorializing that it was Montagu, not Dyer, who should be on trial.⁹⁵ Dyer’s action was necessary to protect “the honour of European women”. The vile attack on Miss Sherwood was recalled. Immediately after the Commons defeated the censure on Montagu, the *Post* launched an “Appeal to Patriots” for funds for Dyer. It was meant to assure him that the British people “dissociated themselves from the mean and cowardly conduct of the politicians and the time-servers” who had so cravenly deserted him. “While General Dyer saved India, the politicians are saving themselves at his expense. It is a burning reproach to the British nation that such a thing could be possible”.

The announcement of the fund drive (10 July 1920) was accompanied by an editorial headed “These Be Thy Gods, O Israel”, and two days later, under the headline “The Cause of World Unrest (the Jews)”, the *Post* began a two-week serialization of the (fraudulent) *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Montagu was Jewish. *The Times* too, notwithstanding its anti-Dyer stance, had drawn attention to this in its coverage of the Commons debate: “Mr Montagu, patriotic and sincere English Liberal as he is, is also a Jew, and in excitement has the mental idiom of the East”. His speech had been insensitive to “our inductive English method of political argument”⁹⁶ (the *Guardian*, to the contrary, described it as “plain speaking . . . obviously embarrassing to the soldier’s apologists”).⁹⁷ The M.P. T. J. Bennett complained to *The Times* that the atmosphere in the Commons debate had been “not free . . . from the racial prejudice which worked

⁹⁴ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Lords), xli, col. 334.

⁹⁵ For fuller details of the *Morning Post* campaign and what follows, see Draper, *Amritsar*, pp. 236-8; Fein, *Imperial Crime and Punishment*, pp. 169-70 (excellent on the anti-Semitism); Furneaux, *Massacre at Amritsar*, pp. 153, 156, 160, 162-3.

⁹⁶ Report of the debate in *The Times*, 9 July 1920 — there is more of the same. Churchill’s was by contrast “a brilliant speech”.

⁹⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 9 July 1920.

mischievous in France during the Dreyfus controversy".⁹⁸ There can be little doubt he was right.

The response to the appeal was staggering. Within twenty-four hours £1,500 had been raised; by 16 July, £10,000; and when the fund was eventually closed, £26,317. 4s. 10d. — a vast sum of money. The contributors were very varied. There were many aristocrats, including the countess of Bathurst, the duke of Westminster, the earl of Harewood and the duke and duchess of Somerset. Rudyard Kipling sent £10 (with the laconic and, I believe, thoroughly accurate observation: "He did his duty, as he saw it"). O'Dwyer subscribed. Despite the Indian government's prohibition on contributions from its officers and servants (many regimental messes and civil servants made them pseudonymously), large amounts were raised in India, amounting to a third of the total collected. Money was donated by jute and railway-workers, schoolchildren, Anglo-European associations and clubs, and forwarded through the Anglo-Indian newspapers. In Bengal 6,250 British women petitioned the prime minister, protesting at Dyer's treatment. A thirteen-woman committee set out to present "the Saviour of the Punjab with a sword of honour and a purse", expressing their "indignation at the dangers of pandering to a small band of disloyal agitators whose noisy mouthings the deluded British public are mistaking for the voice of the loyal millions of India". Many smaller donations, from evidently poorer people, often with army connections, flooded in: "poor and proud", "a widow's mite", "a patriotic Englishwoman and one of the new poor", "a mite for the gallant soldier", "daily breather". Most individual contributions from India were of less than 10 rupees. The voice of those who "knew India", and whose resentment at "the man on the ground" not being trusted to use his own judgement is palpable, is well represented: "Another disgusted sahib", "one of the many wives who have to spend most of their time in India", "eight years in the East", "a daughter and sister of officers who have served in India". And the *Post's* anti-Semitism struck a responsive chord: one contributor signed himself "a believer in the Jewish peril", another "Pogrom". I do not believe such support can be dismissed merely as the voice of a small reactionary fringe. "The condemnation of a loyal Soldier by the 'Gallipoli Gambler'" aroused deep and

⁹⁸ *The Times*, 12 July 1920.

widespread outrage, an outrage at least as great as the Amritsar slaughter itself.

X

Why should this be so? Or, to put the question more sharply, how could the perpetrator of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre come to be so widely perceived as its principal victim?

Dyer's support appears to have come largely from upper- and middle-class groups, or those with direct connections with India or the army. His advocates formed a well-organized and extremely favourably located clique. However, the claim that Dyer was a victim of shoddy political expediency was plausible. Montagu's evasiveness on when he first learned the details of the massacre, Churchill's leaning on the army council, and the semi-public chasm between the home and Indian governments — extensively debated in the press⁹⁹ — all conspired to confirm this. So did the delay of almost a year between the massacre and Dyer's censure, during which time he was twice in effect promoted. From the point of view of the British government, the findings of the Hunter Committee were evidently convenient. Dyer alone could shoulder the blame for martial-law excesses, and Jallianwala, in the meantime, furnished a fine occasion for enunciating a self-congratulatory conception of "Britishness" as something quite different from "Dyerism", and much better suited to the new era of the reforms which bore Montagu's name: "Frightfulness", said Churchill, with more pomposity than historical accuracy, "is not a remedy known to the British pharmacopoeia" (it was the kind of thing, he added, that the Bolsheviks went in for).¹⁰⁰

But it was all somewhat transparent, and Dyer's supporters were in their own way both more honest, and every bit as moral. Bellairs, for one, in the letter I have already quoted, was not

⁹⁹ See the correspondence around O'Dwyer's statements in *The Times*: letters from Holford Knight (10 June 1920); G. Morgan, president of the European Association of India (17 June 1920); H. Beechey (30 June 1920); G. Morgan (2 July 1920); H. Beechey (5 July 1920); M. W. Fenton (8 July 1920). Only Beechey supported Montagu, denouncing the "hoodwinking of the Secretary of State" by the governments of the Punjab and India as "an official crime of the first magnitude". Holford Knight was no supporter of Dyer; he had lobbied for an early inquiry on behalf of the Indian National Congress. See also the Commons exchanges cited above, n. 65.

¹⁰⁰ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1728.

ashamed to claim an historical precedent for Jallianwala Bagh in Governor Eyre's bloody suppression of the Jamaica rebellion of 1865.¹⁰¹ Dyer's expectation of support for his actions from the authorities was not unreasonable, given the way India had been administered since the Mutiny. Indeed he had originally been supported by both Beynon and O'Dwyer. Nor was that action itself quite so foreign to the British imperial mores of the period as was claimed. The clearest indication of this is not simply the impressive extent of Dyer's following, but its lack of apology or embarrassment in elevating "preventive massacre" to the high moral status of Duty. It is the sheer rectitude of the Dyer lobby that is so striking — the more so given the undeniable sense in which Jallianwala was self-evidently singular. Such confidence strongly suggests that Dyer's defence was rooted in widely held norms. The question, then, arises of what kind of ethos could have allowed, indeed obligated, the actions he took.

I mentioned Fein's conclusion that India's British rulers excluded Indians from their universe of moral obligation, and sought to qualify this. To be sure, double standards were grotesquely evident. As T. J. Bennett observed at the time, those who bewailed Dyer's lack of a fair hearing did not extend their respect for due process to "the six lawyers of Gujranwala who were led in handcuffs through the streets of that town, kept in gaol for six weeks, and then released uncharged and untried".¹⁰² But this is not the whole story. Comprehension of the massacre, I believe, lies in what it leaves out.

Men like Dyer and O'Dwyer had a clear conception of their duty towards Indians, and of Indians' obligations towards the Raj, and this conception — though clearly, by 1919, one no longer shared by the government in London — was by no means confined to them alone. Central to it was maintenance of order, and the supreme value placed on order was in turn predicated on their construction of Indians as unfitted to govern themselves. The Mutiny, which loomed large in their imagination, was a recurrent symbol of what could happen when order broke down; a symbol, too, of Indian untrustworthiness and British vulnerability in the face of Bellairs's "hundreds of thousands of fanatical natives". The maintenance of order was justified by Anglo-Indians as being

¹⁰¹ *The Times*, 8 July 1920. Brigadier-General Surtees drew the same parallel in the Commons debate on Dyer: *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Commons), cxxxi, col. 1776.

¹⁰² *The Times*, 12 July 1920.

in the interests of their Indian subjects, and it was the Indians whom they would be failing if they “shirked” this duty, however unpleasant. In the Lords debate Lord Sumner argued that “It was in mercy to them [‘the Indian population themselves’], in order that they might not die, that it became the duty of General Dyer to use force and put to death those who were challenging the authority of the Government, who were rebels, only not in arms”.¹⁰³ The marquess of Salisbury extended the argument to the point where massacre became a beneficent form of moral pedagogy: “The people of India are entering upon a great experiment; and surely the lesson which, above all others, you must teach them is that there is nothing in self-government which authorises disorder”.¹⁰⁴

Central to this ethos was a definite construction of the Indian as subject, and extreme social distancing was an essential mechanism for sustaining such fictions. This was, needless to say, an enduringly racist construction, but of a specific sort; and its particularity needs to be acknowledged if the events of 1919 in the Punjab are to be comprehended. In much Anglo-Indian mythology, the “authentic” India was the India of the villager and the loyal sepoy; “simple manly fellows, far more congenial to it than the Bombay *bania* or shopkeeper-moneylender, or the voluble Bengali *babu* or clerk, or the Madras lawyer, heir of a long line of Brahminical logic-choppers” (the description is Victor Kiernan’s).¹⁰⁵ There is a powerful romance here too, well capable of sustaining affection, respect and even love for India and Indians thus imagined on the part of its “Platonic Guardians”. Kipling evokes it, above all in *Kim*. Philip Mason recalls:

the tolerant and bantering but none the less real affection of master and officer on one side, the soldier’s or villager’s trust, the confidence he mingled with a shrewd perception of character like that with which small boys nickname a schoolmaster. Those feelings were real; servant and master, officer and soldier, risked and sometimes laid down their lives for each other.¹⁰⁶

But, he continues, “the relationship was not one of equality; there could be no familiarity and no unguarded speech”. His reference

¹⁰³ *Hansard*, 5th ser. (Lords), xli, col. 338.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, col. 375.

¹⁰⁵ Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind*, pp. 55-6.

¹⁰⁶ Woodruff, *Men Who Ruled India*, ii, p. 17. The (apt) description “Platonic Guardians” is his — he was himself a twenty-year veteran of the Indian Civil Service, albeit at a later date, and well placed to comment on its self-conceptions.

to “small boys” is telling. So is his comment on Sir Michael O’Dwyer’s formative experiences as a settlement officer in the Western Punjab: “in camp [such an officer] comes to think of the peasants as his children, and the more masculine his character the harder he finds it to believe that anyone else can look after them. And there could be few characters more masculine than O’Dwyer’s”.¹⁰⁷

Among Anglo-Indians, the dominant conception of imperial purpose throughout this period, moulded by the experience of the Mutiny, and haunted by the spectre of its recurrence, was a paternalistic one. Indeed it was abidingly patriarchal: the obverse of O’Dwyer’s masculine power is Miss Sherwood, the female embodiment of violability. Within this vision, and in sharp contrast to the “improving” ethos so widespread earlier in the century,¹⁰⁸ the educated Indian was an anomaly, a transgressor of social boundaries, an offence (and a danger) to the moral classifications on which the Raj reposed. The simple villager would be easily led astray by such men, who if not agents must be dupes of the Kaiser or the Bolsheviki whom O’Dwyer saw lurking everywhere. This is a cast of mind within which political activity could only be comprehended in terms of conspiracy, ordinary Indians having been defined as incapable of political rationality. What was expected of them was obedience, loyalty and gratitude, of the kind symbolized in investing Dyer as an “honorary Sikh”. They had a right to fatherly care — and this entailed, when necessary, fatherly chastisement.

What stand out most, for me, in the testimony surrounding the 1919 Punjab disorders, are the recurrent vocabularies of the schoolroom. Doveton employed punishments redolent of the public schools in which his kind were raised. Dyer spoke of “teaching a lesson” to “naughty boys”; and his frequent references to his “horrible duty” recall nothing so much as the schoolmaster’s “this will hurt me as much as it hurts you”. Salisbury took the argument to its grotesque extreme. I do not doubt either that the situation was perceived as dangerous to whites, with the experience of the Mutiny very much in mind, or that there were other, time-honoured racial myths at work, as in the persistent references to “violation” of white women. But what makes most sense

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁸ I am thinking, for example, of the views of C. E. Trevelyan or Lord Macaulay. See Kiernan, *Lords of Human Kind*, pp. 37–42.

of the Amritsar massacre — what allowed it to happen and muted the horror that undoubtedly would have been aroused had it happened in Glasgow, Belfast or Winnipeg — is the rendering of Indians as children: children who once abandoned to their own devices would revert to savagery, like the boys in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Kipling, in his "White Man's Burden", speaks of colonial charges as "new-caught, sullen peoples, half-devil and half-child", which captures it exactly. Anglo-Indian fondness for the "martial races" of India is not unconnected with this imagery. For military relations involve abjuring of adult responsibility: soldiers are always "boys".

It was the place Indians occupied *within* their rulers' moral universe, not their exclusion from it, which explains why, in the situation which prevailed at Amritsar — a "rebellion", as it was necessarily defined by the same set of conceptions — they could be slaughtered for moral effect; like the cattle to whom O'Dwyer once compared them, grazing, as he put it, in the shadow of the British oak.¹⁰⁹ It is this which makes Jallianwala anything but "singular", for what authorized it were the norms of "British India" during this period. It is also this which makes it most enduringly sinister. For if it is thought that the moral consciousness I have tried to reconstruct here is impoverished — that to equate massacre with a jolly good caning betrays a lack of proportion — then the appropriate answer is an old one. One thing Chatham did say, contrary to Bellairs, was that "unlimited power is apt to corrupt the minds of those who possess it".¹¹⁰

XI

General Dyer died on 23 July 1927. Obituaries were sympathetic, and he was given a military funeral; wreaths and flowers were laid at the Cenotaph in Whitehall. Sir Michael O'Dwyer fought, and won, a libel action in the court of King's Bench in 1922. Mr. Justice McCardie advised the jury that in his view "General Dyer, in the grave and exceptional circumstances, acted rightly, and . . . was wrongly punished by the Secretary of State for India".¹¹¹ The jury agreed, by a majority of eleven to one (the dissenter

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Draper, *Amritsar*, p. 33.

¹¹⁰ *History, Debates and Proceedings of Both Houses of Parliament of Great Britain, 1743-1774*, v (London, 1792), p. 141.

¹¹¹ Quoted in Draper, *Amritsar*, p. 260.

was Harold Laski). On 13 March 1940, O'Dwyer was shot by a Sikh who was at Jallianwala on the day of the massacre. Udham Singh was tried, and hanged; his statement to the jury was suppressed under the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act of 1939. The avenger of Amritsar has not been entirely forgotten, however. In 1987, in the London borough of Hounslow, a motion to name a street after Udham Singh caused resignations within the Labour Party, on the grounds that he was, "in the final analysis, a murderer".¹¹²

It is not altogether inappropriate to give the last word to an Irishman. Bernard Shaw once remarked that "There is nothing so bad or good that you will not find Englishmen doing it; but you will never find an Englishman in the wrong . . . His watchword is always Duty; and he never forgets that the nation which lets its duty get on the opposite side of its interest is lost".¹¹³ Moral rhetoric was ubiquitous in the Dyer affair. It would be the gravest of errors to conclude from this that it was a mere gloss, irrelevant to practical questions of governance, on either side.

University of Alberta

Derek Sayer

¹¹² Reported in *Sunday Times*, 10 Apr. 1988.

¹¹³ George Bernard Shaw, *The Man of Destiny*, in *The Works of George Bernard Shaw*, 33 vols. (London, 1930-8), viii, p. 193. I owe this reference to P. A. Saram.